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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the relationships which exist between the looking-glass-self theory of human behavior of Charles Horton Cooley (published in 1902) and the idea of social penetration of I. Altman and D. Taylor (published in 1973). The paper discusses Cooley's classic metaphor of the looking-glass-self: humans use the verbal and nonverbal responses of others to fashion a mosaic picture of who they are and how they respond to the world. The paper then discusses the social penetration theory in which relationships develop through time in a systematic and predictable fashion and which involve different levels of intimacy of exchange or degree of social penetration. The paper concludes that neither theory is complete without the other and a total understanding must view the two as a unified system. (RS)

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THE THEORETICAL INTERSECTION OF THE LOOKING-GLASS-SELF AND SOCIAL PENETRATION

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the relationships which exist between the looking-glass-self of Charles Horton Cooley and the idea of social penetration of Altman and Taylor. The intersection of these two theoretical approaches is described and mathematical relationships are detailed. The paper advances the notion that neither theory is complete without the other and a total understanding must view the two as a unified system.

THE THEORETICAL INTERSECTION OF THE LOOKING-GLASS-SELF AND SOCIAL PENETRATION

Given the plethora of theories to explain human behavior it would be reasonable to assume that behavioral scientists would be able to locate the "correct" description of any given set of human interactions. Such is not the case. Instead, human behaviors can and have been explained by an incredible array of theoretical approaches. Potential answers and explanations seem to abound. Are we simply creatures driven by the forces of our environment as the behaviorists claim or are we always at the crossroads of decision seeking closure as the psychological balance theorists claim? Further, if reinforcement is the answer, is it mediated or unmediated? On the other hand, if the balance theorists are correct, is the answer cognitive dissonance, exchange theory or attribution theory?

It is likely the path through this tangle of explanations lies in the realization that all these diverse approaches probably have elements of truth but the actual unifying explanation of human behavior may be more complex than we had heretofore suspected. It appears to be the case that

virtually any theory of behavior is applicable under some set of circumstances, some of the time, for some people. Clearly, none of the explanations are "wrong" in the usual sense of that word but neither are they "right" for all categories of behavior.

Perhaps the most apt explanation of this dilemma is that all of the standard or well known theories of human behavior are correct in some respects but all, or nearly all, are flawed in that they describe special situations. While a great many of the pieces of the grand theory are probably known at the present time, it remains for a theorist to integrate those pieces into a coherent whole. The purpose of this paper is to speculate on the relationship of two such pieces of the human behavioral puzzle and to offer a rationale of how those disparate theoretical approaches fit together to form a coherent whole. The two theories in question are the idea of Charles Horton Cooley (1902) called the "looking-glass-self" and the notion advanced by Altman and Taylor (1967) of social penetration.

The looking-glass-self

When Cooley described the idea of the looking-glass-self in his now famous book Human Nature and the Social Order (1902). he probably never

dreamed he would create a classic metaphor which would last into the foreseeable future of behavioral science. In fact, Cooley used the metaphor in so casual a way that it is not even listed in the book's index although it does appear in the chapter summary of the table of contents.

The basic idea of the looking-glass-self is drawn from the couplet quoted by Cooley (1902, pg. 152):

"Each to each a looking glass

Reflects the other that doth pass"

Interestingly, Cooley does not cite the source for this quotation in his book. After a considerable search, the origin of the line appears to be a poem of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1904) entitled "Astraea." As so often happens with arresting word choices, the basic idea for the metaphor was not the social scientist but the illuminati. Even a hasty reading of the poem will bring to light the basic theme of the looking-glass-self even though the social science application is clearly the property of Cooley.

Perhaps the reason Cooley did not cite the source for his inspiration was that Emerson was so much a part of the education of his day that Cooley felt no citation was necessary. This likelihood is underscored when we understand that citational norms have changed drastically since

Cooley wrote and, for its time, his is a rather careful and well documented book. On the other hand, it is more probable that Cooley was simply relying on his remembrance of a favorite poem. This latter interpretation is corroborated by noting that the lines are clearly from Emerson's poem but Cooley misquotes them. Emerson (1904) really wrote:

"Each to each a looking-glass

Reflects his figure that doth pass."

Cooley's mutation of the quotation is an indication that he was operating from memory and was probably so convinced of the accuracy of his recollection that he failed to verify the actual couplet. None of this discussion however is meant to diminish Cooley's contributions to the social sciences. The clarification is offered only as a means of repaying a long forgotten debt to Emerson.

Basic principles

Expanding on the looking-glass metaphor, Cooley further explained that the theory had "three principle elements:

1. the imagination of our appearance to the other person
2. the imagination of his judgment of that appearance

3. some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification." (1902, pg. 152).

Cooley's description of the looking-glass-self has caused generations of social scientists to use the allusion of the looking-glass-self in both writing and teaching. Using the verbal and nonverbal responses of others, we fashion a mosaic picture, albeit indirectly, of who we are and how we shall respond to the world. In sum, the notion that we learn the substance of our own identities in the reflections of other's eyes and in the echos of other's voices is at once compelling and provocative. Moreover, Cooley's idea has been taken to the next logical level: we have a tendency to become the person others say we are.

While it is impossible to corroborate the basic premise of the looking-glass-self in the ordinary experimental paradigm -- one can hardly be randomly assigned to a social role, e. g. intelligent person -- the looking glass has been accorded the next best scientific test. The most through examination of Cooley's idea indicates that the available data are not inconsistent with the process suggested by the looking-glass-self (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Eden & Shani, 1982).

In addition to these principles, Cooley also postulated that the person

serving as our looking glass is of crucial importance in the process of self-determination. He wrote "this is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling." (1902, pp. 152-153). He thus makes clear that the esteem in which we hold the other is a powerful factor in our own estimation of the importance we give to the reflective image which we mentally construct. In this sense, Cooley subsumes both the behaviorists and the balance theorists since self- identification becomes a dual function of the person offering the reflected stimulus image and our own need to bring that image into some sort of focus to achieve closure.

Moreover, the resolution of this duality shifts as a function of the other's perceived credibility. Clearly, we give more weight to the image of ourselves projected by important persons than the image projected by less important persons. In general, then, Cooley provided a rather precise definition of the relationship between image valence and credibility in his original formulation. He rather clearly states that as our esteem for the image source increases, the impact of the projected image also increases. Cooley may or may not have meant that the relationship is linear but he

obviously meant that it is monotonic. While it may seem odd, this formulation has not been widely acknowledged nor described over the years by writers who rely on Cooley for a theoretical base.

What was understood, in time, was that the singular idea of the looking-glass-self suggested by the poetic verse was not limited to the implied binomial analogy of "each to each". No individual exists in a world observed and reacted to by simply one other individual. Our self-identity is the product which springs from the responses of many others and it is their collective reactions which forms the nexus of our self-concept. This logical extension provides the basis for George Herbert Mead's now famous "generalized other" which was, in itself, a milestone in behavioral science theory. The debt owed Cooley is large indeed.

The looking-glass-self as a source of third party data

There is, however, another more intriguing aspect of the metaphor of the looking-glass-self which apparently eluded Cooley as well as many others. If it is the case that we discover our social identity by observing the image reflected back to us by others, it is not also possible for that image to be available to third parties? Caught up in the heady euphoria of the imagery evoked by the poetic words "each to each," Cooley apparently

overlooked the possibility that by shifting the angle of the observers' mirror ever so slightly other people could also view the target person. In fact, it is not even necessary that we ever meet the person being reflected in the mirror. Using an obtuse angle of observation, we may obtain a rather detailed and comprehensive understanding of the individual by being able to see images reflected in the mirrors of those who know the person.

In the informal sense, we may share information with others concerning a third party who may not be present. When two people discuss a third person, they are simply comparing the images of their respective looking glasses with one another discovering similarities and differences. In short, we gossip.

In the formal sense, such a process lies at the heart of the biography and is employed extensively by films. On occasion, the depiction of a book or film may be so vivid that we even come to feel that we "know" the subject person even though it might be impossible for us to do so e. g. a historical figure.

The looking-glass-self as a source of self-analysis

Moreover, the amount of information in the looking glass is even more

varied; if one considers the mirror itself as simply an information source, then it is available to even the owner of the mirror. While it is true that the object in the mirror -- the person being reflected -- is the primary information recipient considered by most theorists, it is also possible for the person holding the mirror to be more than casually aware of the reflected image in one's own mirror. At some point, the astute individual must be aware of the responses being offered to the others in his or her mirror. There is, then, a response to one's own responses when this realization takes place. At that point, one might even realize that the reflected image is erroneous or distorted in some way and take steps to actually alter the image. The image in the mirror may not only tell others who they are but it may also tell us who we have become.

As a case in point, consider the response a spurned lover might have to a person having the same surname or physical resemblance to the former love object. With some frequency, we may hear words to the effect, "I don't like Frank." When it is either pointed out by others or realized by the communicator that the reason for not liking Frank might be because Frank is the name of one's former love interest, valuable self-information is gained. Such a realization could easily lead to an

alteration of one's behavior or attitudes.

These brief observations should make clear the degree to which Cooley has impacted the thinking of modern behavioral scientists. His pioneering work has survived the stern test of time and his thinking has emerged as clearly today as when he wrote at the turn of the century. Nevertheless, the looking-glass-self is not the complete answer for social scientists seeking closure. In that spirit, the goal of this paper is to place this seminal idea into clearer focus by describing the intersection of the looking-glass-self and social penetration.

Social penetration

Altman and Taylor (1973) in a book now familiar to every behavioral science graduate student, wrote that relationships "develop through time in a systematic and predictable fashion." (pg. 3). Moreover, they argue that all relationships "involve different levels of intimacy of exchange or degree of social penetration" (pg. 3). Their position is that as we progress from the stages of stranger to casual acquaintance to friend to intimate, the degree of social penetration or self-disclosure is necessarily a part of that progress. Concomitant with this penetration is the idea that the range of topics grows ever wider with increasing involvement and the

depth of topic consideration by the pair becomes more exhaustive.

Two inferences are immediately obvious concerning social penetration. First, the idea of social penetration rests squarely on the self-disclosure of the target person to some other individual. In that sense, social penetration is the informational reverse of the looking-glass-self. In the former, information is transmitted to the target person; in the latter, information is transmitted by the target person. Self-disclosure, the primary vehicle of social penetration, is then the self-report of the target person concerning the perceived image from Cooley's mirror.

Second, social penetration is an integral part of the credibility-image valence link suggested by Cooley. That is, as the bond between the two persons progresses from stranger to intimate, the amount of self-disclosure increases monotonically. This seems to be the case whether one subscribes to the cause of such disclosure being liking (Altman & Taylor, 1967; p. 50) or the norm of reciprocity (Derlega & Chaikin, 1975; p. 40). Progressive involvement from the category of stranger to an intimate is clearly a movement from a less central to a more central position in our lives. Thus, the message transmitted by the

reflected image of an intimate would carry far more import than the same message/image projected by a stranger. However, having made this statement we must pause. With some frequency, the logical relationship of enhanced credibility and enhanced image valence does not obtain.

Social penetration, image accuracy and image completeness

At no point in this discussion have we commented on the accuracy of the image reflected by the looking-glass-self of others. Until now, the question has been moot. After all, Cooley's idea involved the image perceived by the target person in the looking glass of another. Whatever image was received, accurate or inaccurate, was the stimulus which concerned us. In addition, the degree to which the image received was a complete picture has also be neglected. Once again, the issue was the perceived image. Altman and Taylor have introduced a new element: the relationship of the other person vis a vis ourselves.

To truly understand the impact of social penetration theory on the looking-glass-self perhaps it would be wise to systematically examine each level of involvement to aid us in assessing the import of that level's looking glass. In addition, of course, we must address the topics of image accuracy and image completeness. These concerns become not only

interesting but crucial in the intersection of the two approaches.

Stranger

The category of strangers is one that is probably given little notice and even less analysis in assessing the impact of their responses on us. In the first place, they know little about us and, in the second place, their responses -- even if they are totally accurate -- are likely to be taken lightly. More than any other category of interactant, the stranger has the most incomplete picture of us. His is an understanding based on fleeting interactions and his reflected image can be, and probably is, safely ignored by most. In the main, the feedback of the stranger is likely to be nonverbal rather than verbal and any verbal comments are probably gratuitous. In terms of image accuracy, the reflected image of the stranger is easily dismissed. His reflected image is based on fragmentary data and, in any case, may rely more on educated guesses aided by psychological closure than on any firm knowledge.

There is the exception of the "stranger on the plane" phenomenon. This situation arises when we choose to self-disclose to a complete stranger some item of importance in order to simply cathart. In this case, the role of the stranger is to listen and sagely nod at appropriate times.

We neither desire nor require the reflected image of this individual. In essence, we have covered the looking glass of the stranger on that plane so that no image is transmitted.

Casual acquaintance

The casual acquaintance is in a better position to offer an image which we may take seriously even if it is an image of a limited nature. The person who knows us only as a co-worker, a long-time patron of a business establishment or as a fellow commuter may still be in a position to offer valuable information concerning who we are and where we fit into the social scheme of things. The causal acquaintance may see only a limited part of who we are but that limited picture may comprise an important key to the larger image if married to enough other limited pictures. Because casual acquaintances are not among our inner circle, they are uniquely qualified to offer a picture reasonably undistorted by bias which might accompany a more emotion laden reflection of another. On the other hand, because the causal acquaintance is not part of our inner circle, it is relatively easy to discount the information offered -- but not as easy as it is to discount the information of the stranger.

Friend

The friend is the first person in the paradigm who begins to know the real person we are. A friend is often whimsically defined as a person who knows us and likes us anyway. The friend is then, by definition, a person who reflects back to us an image which we dare not ignore. By the same token, the friend, because of this deeper knowledge of us, may also suffer the greatest amount of image distortion discussed thus far. The friend's personal and perhaps emotional involvement in our lives may cause the projected image to be less than totally objective. Nonetheless, there is a strong tendency for us to give serious credence to this image since it is based on a firm knowledge base.

Intimate

The intimates in our lives comprise the most valuable personal relationships we possess. These are the persons who love us, sometime undeservedly, and support us even in times of great personal turmoil. They understand us more throughly than any other group and they are perfectly capable of making accurate predictions concerning our behavior. The completeness of their image has no parallel. However, the very depth of their knowledge may also render them at least partially blind to our

shortcomings. At some level, it may be asserted that most of us have always known this failing of the intimate. Indeed, that is the very reason for our peculiar behavior when asking for advice and reassurance from intimates only to dismiss that advice or assurance.

Integration of the looking-glass-self and social penetration

People seeking feedback often enlist the aid of significant others in their quest. One may ask an intimate for inputs concerning some critical problem. Oddly, such inputs are often discounted or even totally ignored. Could there be an underlying dynamic in this ubiquitous behavior? Phrased another way, what levels of the social penetration schema yield the most distortion free image of the target person?

One possible reason that we might discount the requested advice of another is because we doubt its accuracy even if we are convinced of its emotional concern. As a consequence, advice sought from a family member, oldest and dearest friend or any significant other may be sought not so much for its information value as for its cathartic value. At some level, each of us expects and certainly hopes that support and reassurance will be forthcoming from such a person. The praise of an intimate is tainted by their personal relationship with the information seeker.

At what levels of the social penetration diagram would we expect to find the most distortion free image? Due to the lack of information, strangers might be able to provide little objective data for us. Along with the assessment of intimates, the image distortion of a stranger would be open to question. On the other hand, the assessments of casual acquaintances and friends might yield more concrete information and hence be more useful.

The emerging pattern being suggested is a curvilinear one. The most distorted image is likely that of the stranger. Next, but for a completely different reason, is the distortion of the intimate. Friends and casual acquaintances are thus the most accurate in their reflected images given their combination of objectivity and interactional knowledge.

On the other hand, the completeness of the reflected image seems to vary directly with the penetration level. The least complete image being that of the stranger progressing to the most complete image of the intimate.

Interestingly, both the accuracy of the image and the completeness of that image are probably well understood by the average person. None of this however may serve to assuage the bruised persona of the intimate

who, after being consulted, is summarily ignored. Such behavior serves only to illustrate the intricate relationship between penetration and the looking-glass so long understood yet not made explicit until the two theories are considered as a total interactive system.

Who would use accurate images?

It is curious but axiomatic that most persons would not be able nor willing to use the relatively accurate information of other's looking glass. The images received from casual acquaintances and friends might easily be dismissed if those images offered negative data. Most would probably prefer the "rosy picture" offered by our intimates all the while harboring the strong suspicion that this image was not completely consistent with reality.

The most interested consumer of accurate images might well be the uninvolved bystander. The biographer or film maker, seeking to to understand the individual, may well be in the best position to use the information provided in the looking glasses of casual acquaintances and friends to piece together a kaleidoscope of the target person. In a sense, the picture obtained would suffer from a fragmentary quality but profit from a relatively distortion free reflection.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to place into a clearer focus the intersection of Charles Horton Cooley's looking-glass-self and the social penetration idea of Altman and Taylor. It is the contention of this writer that one theory is not fully comprehensible without the integrating knowledge offered by the other. If this work promotes the further investigation and theoretical advances in understanding human behavior, the aims undertaken at the outset will have been more than satisfied.

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